

Episode 62: Ginny Crisco

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, I talk with Ginny Crisco about culturally sustaining pedagogies, practices that help foster student success, universal design for learning, and directed self-placement.

Ginny Crisco has been with the Department of English at Fresno State since 2005. She coordinates the first-year writing program, teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in writing, literacy studies, and composition theory and pedagogy, and conducts workshops with Central Valley High School teachers on teaching expository writing. Her scholarship bridges areas of literacy and rhetoric, explores the connections between language, diversity, and activism, and extends conversations about the effects of critical pedagogy on literacy and learning. Her current work builds on these links to implement Universal Design for Learning, a pedagogical approach that promotes flexibility, accessibility, and high expectations for a broad range of learners in secondary and college writing classrooms.

Ginny, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Do you mind talking about teaching at California State University, Fresno, a public Hispanic Serving Institution with about 25,000 students?

GC: Fresno State is part of the California State University system and it's one of 23 campuses. It's one of the larger campuses in the system. And so, often we're looked at, from other campuses as a kind of a model for some of the stuff that we're doing. So we have a very diverse student population. In fact, White students are the minority at Fresno State. And Hispanics, well like Latinx students are the majority. Most of them are local. We do get some from other areas such as the Bay Area or Southern California. So, it is very rewarding to work at Fresno State. In fact, the students that I work with is one of the most rewarding pieces of working at Fresno State because often, those students, and this is a huge generalization because there is a lot of diversity in our Latinx student population, but the most rewarding experiences are those students who have really come from very poor backgrounds, who don't speak English as their first language, whose parents work and work and work, are not educated themselves. And they come to college because they see hope for the future.

Seeing that diversity and supporting students, that is one of the great things about working here. And then also, part of what has happened with me is that, I work with teachers a lot now and so helping teachers to think about the ways that they can cultivate culturally sustaining pedagogies in their classrooms. Some of our teachers really wish that they would have had culturally sustaining pedagogies when they were going through....and that's really a term from education. It's not really an our discipline as much, but it's this idea, like if you've ever read the stuff by Moll and Gonzalez about accessing our students' funds of knowledge and building on that and

using that as a resource in our classrooms. And our field has been talking about that for a long time, I'm not sure that we always do that, but we want to do that and that's a good thing.

SW: What does it look like to embrace culturally sustaining pedagogies or what practices help foster students' success among diverse student populations in your local context?

GC: What people have been talking about for a long time to cultivate culturally sustaining pedagogies is to incorporate a diverse reading list. And partly it is pulling together readings from scholars of color or writers of color and women, sort of diversifying the reading list. And to me, that's a very basic one. I think one of the ways, particularly in our first-year writing program, but also in the work that I do with teachers, is that I've been really trying to think about the idea of how we integrate code meshing, and how we make that something part of our pedagogy, and how to support new teachers in making that happen. Particularly, I think it's more challenging in secondary institutions because of the state standards that they have to follow. There's administration that doesn't quite understand all those different things.

So helping teachers to realize...and also I think that our field is really new at those pedagogies and what that looks like. Even though there is conversation about that and there's really good conversation about that, I think we're still thinking through how best to teach code meshing. And so using model texts is one way of doing that, right? There're different kinds of code meshing, right? There is the code meshing that's more of a Black English approach, right? Where you're integrating Black English, but then there's also, what's really more common at the Hispanic Serving Institution is the Spanglish or in our case Hmonglish, because we do have a Hmong student population as well. Trying to find readings that model that kind of code meshing for different audiences, because that's part of the issue. Right?

Like, Gloria Anzaldua's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," is an example of code meshing, but it's written for a White academic audience and you can kind of tell just by analyzing it. Right? And so trying to find those readings that will model the ways that professional writers are doing that. Trying to help students understand the idea of audience because audience is a very abstract term, right? So if you start thinking about audience, who's your audience? "Oh, it's everybody." That's the kind of the default with students. But once you start saying like, "Okay, well, what if your audience was your friends, are you going to speak this formal language?" Then...in that kind of language teaching, trying to, first of all, talk about power dynamics of language.

Second of all, talking about the choices that we have, right? So even just saying something like, "What's the difference between a formal tone and an informal tone?" To sort of help students see that there are choices as far as that goes when they shape their sentences and their language and do those kinds of things. But then also helping teachers to think about the way that they respond. This is something that Asao Inoue brought, of course, to our writing program is, he did research with some graduate students several years back when he was here, and part of what they found was that, the students who were second language speakers, or that spoke English as another language, that they got more comments about their language. So we might say like, "Oh, well,

that makes sense because maybe they're still learning how to speak English in a formal way.” But his point was to say maybe we need to look into that. Maybe we're targeting those students too much, maybe we are not making a space for diversity in our language practices. So that's one of the things that I've continued to do even after he's left is say, “Let's look at the ways that we are encouraging our students, supporting them, helping them to use the variety of language practices that they have in their lives.” Right? Because part of first-year writing is getting students ready for the rest of the university, but it's also cultivating public intellectuals.

SW: You're also working in collaboration with other California State University colleagues and secondary teachers to develop curriculum that focuses on Universal Design for Learning. Can you talk more about this work?

GC: I'm working with several other colleagues across California State Universities and secondary teachers on this program called ERWC—Expository Reading and Writing Curriculum. It's a federal grant. It's \$12 million. For a long time, since, I would say mid '90s, the CSU have said that they wanted to reduce the remediation to less than 10% by...2002 or something like that. And that never happened because of how we measure what is remedial. And there's a long history of that, and I can go into that, but I don't think it's necessarily relevant right now. But what that prompted or what it promoted is that the CSU started putting money into programs to go into high schools to better align the kind of work that high school students were doing with the kinds of requirements at the college level, and more specifically how they were being trained or taught how to write.

So this group that I'm working with, we've gotten together with high school teachers and literacy coaches and County Offices of Education, and what we've done is we've created curriculum that teaches students how to read expository texts and then respond and make arguments. And so it's re-energized my career and my profession. So a lot of the stuff that I do with them, I also bring into the first-year writing classroom. Then, I also do that work with secondary teachers who are...I teach like a literacy studies class for pre-service English teachers at the upper division level and those kinds of things. Some of the things that I brought from the ERWC that I think that I've always been committed to, but inquiry assets-based collaborative approach to students, right?

So believing in their abilities to complete their work and to move forward and to do things, working together collaboratively in order to build a kind of opportunity for shared learning and helping each other and inquiry based, right? So really trying to encourage students to find the things that they're interested in and follow up on those things and show them how writing works in the world, that we're not just jumping through hoops, that we're not just assigning writing, but that we're actually helping them to cultivate their voice and providing opportunities for them to use that voice. And partly that's through also teaching about genre awareness. And then the other thing, particularly that the grant has allowed me to do is, do more research on Universal Design for Learning. That's a more recent interest of mine, particularly because I have a daughter with a disability.

My dad and sister have disabilities. I've kind of grown up with disability my whole life. And so I had learned about UDL with my daughter and thinking about her schooling, but then the grant

gave me an opportunity to research UDL. I'm actually kind of the lead in this grant on the UDL front. A lot of people know about UDL, but I'm the one that's kind of like helping people along and providing the guidance for it. And so I've been trying to integrate more Universal Design for Learning strategies into the first-year writing program and teaching teachers about that across the board as well. So those are some of my commitments, as far as that goes.

SW: You co-coordinate the first-year writing program at Fresno State. The program uses a Directed Self-Placement (DSP) model. I was hoping you could spend some time talking about Directed Self-Placement and the rationale behind this model and its success at Fresno State.

GC: We were like the second CSU to start using Directed Self-Placement. And now, I would say more than half are using Directed Self-Placement or wanting to move in that direction. And probably, I would say two thirds to three quarters have a stretch course, which is also part of our Directed Self-Placement. And it's partly because of our leadership...and also San Francisco State had a stretch course, Sacramento got on board really quickly. So those are some of the three largest and most diverse institutions in the CSU's. Because the very first one was Channel Islands and it's kind of a small campus. When we started using it, then people were like, "Oh" ...and San Jose is really strong with that now, so anyways, yes, you're absolutely right, like Directed Self-Placement, the idea is like, "Hey, you're coming to college. So you need to make a decision about what your learning is going to look like." It's based on this idea of what they call self-efficacy, which roughly translates to your competence level.

Because what they find is that self-efficacy actually is a better indicator of whether or not you'll succeed in a class rather than other kinds of things like your writing ability during a timed test or your grades in a classroom, or those kinds of things. So one of the things that I'm trying to work on is how to support our most vulnerable language learners, because I think a majority of our students can really be helped in the stretch course. And it's not just about language, but also, some folks are just not very...they don't like English very much.

So our core courses are still the stretch 5A and 5B and the English 10. And then along with that, students can take the Writing Center for one semester or two semesters, depending on how much support they need. So there's a survey that we send out to them and they fill out the survey and the survey asks them things like, "In your last writing experience, did you write five different papers of five pages or more each? Are you used to reading about 20 pages of reading per week and taking notes? Do you have any experience with peer review? And do you have strategies for reading?" So we have this whole list of questions, and then in the end...so the survey is really based on, should you go into 5A/5B, or should you go into English 10?

And then we do have some very limited sections in the linguistics program for those vulnerable language learners, but we're trying to make something that's maybe a little bit more integrated, but anyway. So from there, then they can sign up for the Writing Center, but they have to do that on their own. Of course we take them to the Writing Center usually in the first day, or during the first week.

The way that our Writing Center is set up is that we have, as you know, semester long groups, small group tutorials that students sign up for, they sign up for a one-unit credit. And ultimately

what it does is it gives them some peer mentoring, I mean, they're focusing on writing and they bring their assignments, and they're working with a peer who is an upper division student in the university or a graduate student. And it's small groups, it's three students to one tutor. So it does provide that kind of peer mentorship that I think is really valuable. The students have lots of really great things to say about it. When we look at the numbers, the students who go through the Writing Center are more successful than the, as you know, the peers that don't come in in similar situations. It's highly tied to the first-year writing program.

SW: You've taught at Fresno State for fifteen years. Is there anything that sticks out to you about teaching there, or maybe, what has surprised you the most about teaching at a Hispanic Serving Institution?

GC: I think one of the things that has surprised me, and one of the things that I continue to talk to my junior colleagues about is that, there is a lot of opportunity for innovation at the California State Universities. I mean, we are a teaching institution, we're not a Research 1 (R1). So you kind of think like, well, it's the Research 1 universities that really have the opportunities for innovation because people have course releases, they're expected to publish. There are more resources often because there are more opportunities for grants or different kinds of fellowships and those kinds of things. But in fact, we have a lot of administrators on campus who are open to our ideas, who will listen to us, who want to innovate, who want what's best for our students, and will listen to arguments as far as that goes, and are really grateful for our work in that regard.

So, it doesn't always happen right away. In fact, sometimes it takes a long time for it to happen, but if we continue to persist, I mean, one of the things that we have been working on for probably since I came in fifteen years ago, is trying to create a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program. Our model for... the CSU has a graduate writing assessment requirement, they call it the GVAR requirement. It means that when you graduate, either with a bachelor's degree or a master's degree, that you have to demonstrate proficiency in writing, and the way that we do that, and the way that many CSU have done it is through a deficit model. Which is, you take a test and if you don't pass it, then you can take the test again. And if you don't pass it, then you have to take a course.

And so that's really saying, "Hey, we got to remediate you." So we are slowly trying to move into a writing in the disciplines approach where students are learning about their literacy practices in different disciplines, but professors and often it's lecturers who teach those courses need to have guidance and best practices and writing instruction. Particularly language instruction, too, because otherwise it comes off as kind of like, again, continuing...in some ways it's easy to teach writing from a deficit model, because that is the dominant narrative about the teaching of writing in our sort of common, in public schools. You've got the Jane Schaffer model, the step up to writing. So, a lot of people...or there's no teaching of writing and it's just assigning of writing.

We've had a couple of Writing Across the Curriculum coordinators. They were temporary, but we have somebody coming in this year who is permanent. Again, we're trying to provide students with the resources that they need for their success. I think part of...one thing I wanted to kind of follow up on with the last question about the model of our Directed Self-Placement and

some of the political stuff that's going on in California in relationships to higher education, which I think we really need to be paying attention to, which is, I think it's good to provide support for students as far as giving them classes and resources and those kinds of things, but I think sometimes, we might get a little paternalistic and think, "Oh, you got to take a lot of classes in order for you to be up to par or whatever." And that's just as dangerous and damaging to students as well.

I think we really need to be mindful about how we support students and what kind of requirements we put on them. I mean, this is really coming out of UDL, too, because one of the things that UDL says is, okay, well students with disabilities, they get accommodations, right? That's part of the ADA law. Right? Is that people with disabilities deserve accommodations in order to get to the same level as people who don't need those accommodations. But what the UDL folks have found is that in fact, some of the modifications or the approaches that Universal Design for Learning takes actually works for a lot of different people, including people who are second language learners, including high-performing. In their research, while not really integrated with culturally sustaining pedagogies, really does focus on this idea that all learners that come into the classroom are diverse. So we need to be aware of those diversities and note taking is a common accommodation.

Having like class group notes that different people are responsible for is maybe one way where we can kind of spread the wealth, because maybe one person needs to have a note taker, but those notes might be useful for other students in the class, too, even if only as a model of how to note take. I mean, I was the first person to go to college in my family. I did not have any of those student practices. I don't know how I got to where I'm at, except for maybe just hard work, but if I would have had some of those strategies, I think maybe things would have been a lot easier. So I guess what I'm trying to say is that, really we can't just say, Oh, we need to load them up with more classes and those kinds of things. But we need to really have those targeted interventions that are not just good for our most vulnerable students but can also be good for all students.

SW: Thanks, Ginny. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.